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The Purgatory Souls as Interceding Agents Between Earth and Heaven

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Abstract: A number of Catholic prayers and rituals are expressly conceived to keep and strengthen the relationship between the living and the dead. One of the most significant beliefs concerns Purgatory, an otherworldly place located between Earth and Heaven devoted to the purgation of those who are not sufficiently pure to ascend directly to Heaven. As such, the Purgatory souls can be seen as the most similar, or else the most sensitive to the living and their uncertain and painful condition. According to the Catholic doctrine, the Purgatory souls, if duly invoked, can intercede with God in favour of the living. On the other hand, prayers and rituals addressed to the faithful departed can shorten their stay in Purgatory. A mutual benefit can thus ensue when the living and the dead keep their connection. I will focus on two specific practices from southern Italy, two different but equally intense and substantial forms of worship of Purgatory souls and of their connection with the living. Firstly, the Neapolitan cult of anime pezzentelle ("mendicant souls"), a phenomenon of popular piety according to which thousands of skulls piled up in the city underground are regarded as the earthly remains of Purgatory souls. Secondly, based on a field-work conducted in my hometown (Castellaneta, Puglia), a ritual prayer known as the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*; it revolves around the *Requiem aeternam*, a short prayer invoking an "eternal rest" for the faithful departed, which is recited a total of a hundred times. A significant case, indeed, of revitalization and reassessment of an old-fashioned practice – the Rosary for the dead – into a collective and monthly ritual performed in a cemetery. After all, these are two emblematic examples of the remarkable place the dead still occupy in the lives of so many people, especially if they are regarded as otherworldly agents of those who pray for them.

Keywords: afterlife, dead, intercession, prayer, purgatory, ritual, southern Italy, worship

INTRODUCTION

The dead, death and afterlife have a prominent and significant place and role both in the Catholic religion and in the lives and minds of individuals and groups which belong, to varying degrees, to the Catholic faith and culture, as emblematically assessed, first and foremost, by the seminal work of Ernesto de Martino (2008). The common purpose of so many Catholic beliefs, prayers, rituals and practices is indeed that of preserving, strengthening, enhancing the relationship between the living and the dead. Through these latter, the connection of the earthly, immanent condition of the faithful can be made closer and deeper to the transcendency of the hereafter. The different status of the dead souls based on their conduct on Earth is also implicit in this relationship. This is exactly what we can infer from both popular religious practices I am going to present in this article. They are based indeed on a strong familiarity and interplay between our condition as mortal and precarious beings, and an afterlife embodied by a peculiar category of the dead: the holy souls in Purgatory. On the one hand, an individual and informal worship of single dead, in form of anonymous skulls, taking place in the underground of Naples since approximately 150 years ago, is currently on the wane because of an ecclesiastical interdiction; on the other hand, a collective and formalized worship of all Purgatory souls is performed as a ritual prayer inside the cemetery of my hometown, Castellaneta (Puglia), starting in 2017; some months later, this became the subject of my field research.

As argued by Jacques Le Goff (1984: 1): "The life of the believer undergoes a change when he becomes convinced that life does not end with death." This is all the more actual and effective if we think of the so called "third place" of the Catholic hereafter: Purgatory. In spite of having "installed itself firmly in the mind of Western Christendom" not earlier than "between 1150 and 1200 or so" (Le Goff 1984: 4), Purgatory can be seen as one of the most widespread and pervasive dogmas of Catholic doctrine – but one also "too much forgotten by the majority of the faithful", according to the eminent theologian François X. Schouppe (1893: v). This is perfectly shown by a number of folk customs, sacred pictures, rituals and institutions in southern Italy, which is the specific area of my research (as also studied in a classic and extensive work on the "culture of death", Lombardi Satriani & Meligrana 1989). Just to mention some significant instances, churches and lay confraternities dedicated to the Purgatory – alternatively renamed as the "Orison and Death" – and to Our Lady of Mount Carmel – traditionally seen as the patron saint of the holy souls in Purgatory – are countless (see Alemanno 1988 and Boaga 1990). Purgatorial iconography is rich and very popular, with a variety of holy cards, devotional booklets, votive *aediculae*, shrines, paintings, statues, etc. Above all, to come to my own subject, prayers, rituals and pious practices devoted to the Purgatory souls are something perhaps marginal, at least compared to other ones belonging to the Catholic tradition, but still quite common for some individuals, families

and groups, who can thus keep a significant link both with their dead and an afterlife not too distant from their earthly experience. The aim of this article is therefore to identify, characterize and emphasize the place, function and meanings Purgatory takes on both as a dogma in the Catholic doctrine – the subject of the first two sections – and as a religious belief in the lives and minds of people who took or take care of a kind of dead they consider(ed) similar to themselves and prone to pay attention to their needs, as will be exemplified, in the last three sections, through the abovementioned instances concerning Naples and Castellaneta.

PURGATORY IN CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Basically conceived as an intermediate and intermediary realm spatially and spiritually located between Hell and Heaven,[1] and "between the death of the individual and the Last Judgement" (Le Goff 1984: 6), Purgatory, as "a transitory state", is literally devoted to the purgation – from the Latin verb *purgare*: to clean, to purify, to release – of those "souls which, at the moment of death, are in the state of grace, but which have not completely expiated their faults, nor attained the degree of purity necessary to enjoy the vision of God" (Schouppe 1893: 4). In other words, as suggested by Jerry L. Walls (2012: 6), the doctrine of Purgatory is based on a "sanctification process", as if death were not an immediate but a more gradual transition, during which the dead can still work, through their own *post-mortem* suffering, to be made "actually holy".

As a consequence, Purgatory is also conceived as "a place of punishment", where dead souls are accordingly "endowed with a materiality *sui generis*", so as to make clearer and more palpable the process of purgation, which is usually carried out by fire (cf. Le Goff 1984: 7–11) or, more generally, by "the pain of sense" (Schouppe 1893: 30–34). Fire, indeed, is something very common in popular narratives about Purgatory, where souls "are depicted engulfed in real, not symbolic, fire, the evidence of which include burned charcoal-colored handprints on tables for the living to consider" (Pasulka 2015: 6). As can be seen in the figures below (1 and 2), besides being plunged in fire, the Purgatory souls are also portrayed by iconography in search of mercy from Heaven, with their begging eyes and hands addressed to Jesus or the Virgin Mary, who are placed exactly above them.

Purgatory, in fact, is conceived as a place of mercy, empathy and solidarity as well. First of all, it is God himself who "wishes that our fear should be tempered with great trust in His mercy" (Schouppe 1893: 125), not to mention the Virgin Mary, who is doctrinally seen as a source of consolation of the penitent souls (Schouppe 1893: 135–139). On the other hand, since God "gives to His Church [the power] to shorten the duration of their [i.e. Purgatory souls] sufferings", thus allowing "the intervention of the living [...] to succour our afflicted brethren" (Schouppe 1893: 146), Purgatory turns into a place through

which the living and the dead can be closely and significantly connected, in the first place because "the trial to be endured by the dead may be abridged by the intercessory prayers, the 'suffrages', of the living" (Le Goff 1984: 11). The efficacy of the living's prayers for the dead, along with the existence itself of Purgatory – which was instead firmly rejected by the Protestant Reformation – was solemnly stated by the Council of Trent in the second half of the sixteenth century (for a historical overview of the theological interpretations of Purgatory see Gilardi 2003):

> *Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has, from the sacred writings and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, taught, in sacred councils, and very recently in this oecumenical Synod, that there is a Purgatory, and that the souls there detained are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar* [...]. *But let the bishops take care, that the suffrages of the faithful who are living, to wit the sacrifices of masses, prayers, alms, and other works of piety, which have been wont to be performed by the faithful for the other faithful departed, be piously and devoutly performed, in accordance with the institutes of the church* [...]
> (The Council of Trent: The Twenty-Fifth Session 1848: 232–233; my emphasis)

Figure 1. Holy cards portraying the Purgatory souls in fire begging for mercy from Jesus or the Virgin Mary.

Photograph: Vito Carrassi.

Figure 2. Sculpture representing the Virgin Mary with two Purgatory souls at her feet, inside a church dedicated to Purgatory (Vico del Gargano, Puglia).

Photograph: Vito Carrassi.

In the wake of such a dogmatic and authoritative statement, throughout the seventeenth century "a conception and devotion of the souls in Purgatory as suffering people spreads out"; these souls, on the other hand, were regarded as "involved in the lives of the living both for the practice of the suffrages, and for the symbolic exchange between the living and the dead in the name of *caritas*" (Niola 2022: 38). This topic had already been discussed in the most famous and complete depiction of the Purgatory, namely the homonymous second *cantica* of the poem *Divina Commedia* by Dante Alighieri, regarded by Jacques Le Goff as the "poetic triumph" of the Purgatory (1984: 334–355). In

VI, 1–48, for example, a crowd of souls gather around the poet begging for suffrage prayers from the living, then Dante debates with Vergil about the value of those prayers and their relationship with God's will. Almost three centuries later, in the context of the Counter-Reformation, *pietas* of the living for the dead became a cornerstone of the Catholic pedagogy; therefore the suffrage prayers aimed at helping the Purgatory souls to ascend to Heaven came to be seen as a veritable duty for every faithful (see Pinelli 1603 and 1609). In 1685 Domenico d'Alessandro, a Dominican friar, even wrote that nothing instigates the divine rage more than people neglecting to pray for the Purgatory souls, so much that God punishes them "by his own sword, slaughtering them during lifetime" (quoted in Niola 2022: 35).

As a third place hanging between Earth and Heaven, then between life, death and afterlife, Purgatory also provided the Catholic Church with a means to undermine and assimilate those visions and supernatural beings inherited from the Pagan culture, turning them into Christian dead or Christianised ghosts, thus including them in a religious framework of immortality and eternal deliverance (Niola 2022: 46–47; Delumeau 1978: 136). Eventually, as argued by Michel Vovelle (1996: 111), by dosing punishment and hope, such a third place acted as a powerful social regulator, but also as a way to soothe individual distress and manage the work of grieving, offering a model of peaceful cohabitation between the living and the dead.

A MIRROR OF THE EARTHLY CONDITION

Despite its transcendent nature and location, Purgatory can be considered in many respects as an afterlife mirroring the human condition. Unlike Hell and Heaven, the other two realms of the Christian hereafter, Purgatory, just like our life on Earth, is something transient and not eternal, an experience with a beginning, a duration, and an end.[2] In a sense, the existence of Purgatory makes possible a temporary continuity between the time of life and the time of death, even subjecting the afterlife to a form of measurement and accounting (Fabre 1987: 20–21). On one hand, Purgatory souls suffer for the penance they endure in order to expiate their sins, yet at the same time they are comforted by the certainty of ascending, one day, to God; on the other hand, living people experience both the fear to be punished for their sins and the hope to be saved for their faith and good works. A liminal and precarious condition comes to the fore, in the balance between current pain and future bliss, for the Purgatory souls, or between Hell and Heaven, everlasting damnation and everlasting happiness, for the people still on Earth.

Therefore, a common condition of suffering and future expectation makes the dead and the living more similar and closer, giving rise inevitably to a bond of solidarity and indulgence between them. The common goal is to gain eternal deliverance, although it is only a question of time for the Purgatory souls, while

it is anything but guaranteed for the living. This makes increasingly central the place of the Purgatory souls in the lives of the Catholic faithful, whose *pietas*, taking care of these "unknown, marginal [...] poor souls, turns them into benevolent and aiding souls", a sort of minor saints (Niola 2022: 48; cf. Fabre 1987: 25–27).

A consequence of such a deep and functional relationship between the living and the dead is that, on the one hand, the living can influence, at least in terms of duration of the penance, the afterlife condition of the dead, and, on the other hand, the dead, given their intermediate position between Earth and Heaven, can act as mediators for the living with God or, more precisely, with Jesus or his Mother, who, in their turn, act as mediators between them and the Father. This is, indeed, the meaning of the intercession which is ascribed to the prayer[3] and, more particularly, to the suffrage prayers for the holy souls in Purgatory, as stated by Roberto, a profoundly religious 57-year-old man (today 64), member of a lay confraternity who acted as a main informant in the abovementioned research I am conducting in my hometown, Castellaneta: "We pray for them who, in their turn, will pray for us, so as we all gain the resurrection into the glory of Heaven. We are thus glad to create a stronger connection between us and them" (personal communication 2018). In other words, the devotion for the Purgatory souls gives rise to a mutual exchange of intercessions between the living and the dead, then to a mutual form of agency between two different but interconnected stages of the human condition. Accordingly, there is also a mutual exchange of time, in that the living, by praying and acting for the dead, spend some time of their own life to deduct time from the sufferings of the Purgatory souls, while these (are supposed to) spend part of their transcendent time in favour of the living, thus offering them a hope both for their earthly and afterlife time.

As will be shown by the two examples I will present here, the time devoted to the Purgatory souls can be arranged as an individual and more or less extemporaneous initiative – the Neapolitan cult of *anime pezzentelle* – or as a collective act ritually and regularly performed – the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* in Castellaneta. What is common, however, and really essential for understanding the deep meaning of these pious practices is the fact that they are addressed not to familial or known dead, but to the Purgatory souls in general, especially to the abandoned, forgotten, anonymous souls, considered to be "the souls neediest of Your [i.e. God's] mercy", to mention a canonical phrase used by the Catholic faithful in the suffrage prayers.

PURGATORY IN NAPLES

The name itself ascribed to the Purgatory souls in Naples, *anime pezzentelle*, or "mendicant souls", is indeed a clear sign of their assimilation to the poorest and most marginalised members of the society, that is to those suffering people who need our support and assistance in order to survive in this life; not by

chance, the suffrage prayers for the Purgatory souls were usually matched with the alms for the poor people, who were seen as representatives of the poor of the otherworld (Niola 2022: 35–36).

Another name used to identify the Purgatory souls in Naples, *capuzzelle*, or "little heads", refers instead to their association to an immense multitude of skulls piled up in the underground of the city. Such an association needs to be clarified, first of all to provide a historical frame for the related cult. As already stated, the worship of the Purgatory souls took hold during the seventeenth century and was triggered by some catastrophic events, such as an epidemic of plague in 1656. This made even more pervasive and disquieting the presence of death in everyday life, as well as the anxiety for the afterlife destiny of so many people who suddenly died and were often deprived of funeral ceremonies, if not deprived of their identities themselves, having been hurriedly buried as anonymous victims of the plague. Other epidemics, such as those of cholera in 1836 and 1884, contributed to an increase of the number of the *capuzzelle* piled up in the city underground, in particular in the hypogea of the churches of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco and San Pietro ad Aram as well as in the so called cemetery of Fontanelle, located under the Sanità, one of the most popular districts of Naples. All these anonymous skulls, just because of their identification as Purgatory souls, have become, for more than 150 years, the recipients of a local and peculiar form of *pietas*, based on that same "sympathetic and contractual mutuality ruling the values" of the Neapolitan community (Niola 2022: 24).

Metonymically interpreted as the dead themselves, some of these skulls have been therefore chosen, in the course of time, by single faithful – often following a revealing dream –[4] in order to take care of them as though were their own relatives. In other words, a specific skull, often provided with a name or a nickname and a more or less touching story – such as that of Lucia, a skull embellished with a bridal veil and a crown, to mark her identity as a bride and princess who died too young, or the so called *capa rossa* ("red head"), "also known as the postman of the souls, because he appears in dreams to bring good news" (Niola 2022: 18) – was adopted by an individual who committed, for a lifetime, to visit regularly and pray for it, but also to adorn its niche with candles, flowers, rosaries and other small objects, so as to frame it in a cemeterial setting. More significantly, the skull was regularly cleaned and dampened, even "polished with alcohol and cotton wool" (Ibid.: 17), in order to offer it a physical and symbolic relief and purification from the pains suffered in Purgatory: such a pious act is called in Neapolitan dialect *refrisco*, literally a "refreshment" from the otherworldly fire, something that can be traced back to the early Christian idea of *refrigerium*, referring to a temporary suspension or mitigation of infernal pains (see Grosu 2024). Hence, if a soul is deprived of someone taking care of it, its stay in Purgatory could even be eternal (Pardo 1983: 116).

In the light of the mutuality ruling both the local community and the relationship with the dead, an individual who prayed for and took care of a skull identified as a Purgatory soul expected to be rewarded in some way. Actually, those who adopted a skull were usually individuals in search of a higher source of protection and help for themselves or their relatives. Often expressed in the form of written messages placed next to the skull, the adopters' requests concerned concrete needs such as a recovery, a job, a happy marriage or the numbers to win the lottery: "in other words: safety, stability, continuity", or else all that the Neapolitan people traditionally feel as distant and unreachable (Pardo 1983: 116). As a consequence, here the mutual assistance between the dead and the living takes on a worldly rather than an otherworldly meaning, though always based on a strong sense of empathy and solidarity.

Such a form of popular religion has been nonetheless barely tolerated by the Church, which eventually issued, in 1968, some regulations to put a stop to it (see Niola 2022: 26–27). This kind of worship of the dead was considered superstitious rather than religious, especially for its fetishist attachment to the skulls and the supernatural power ascribed to them; it brought about, indeed, an undue confusion between saints and Purgatory souls – with the latter regarded as definitely closer and more sensitive to the faithful's needs. The main purpose of the ecclesiastical intervention was indeed to emphasize the cemeterial, and not holy, nature of the place, and the adjustment of the cult of the dead to the liturgical norms, starting from the concealment of the bones (D'Andrea 1997: 49). These measures, combined with prohibitions and closures due to safety reasons and restorations, have made it even more difficult to access the hypogea in the recent years, considerably limiting and deterring the worship of the *anime pezzentelle*, but not that sense of proximity and familiarity with the dead still experienced by so many Neapolitan – and, more generally, southern Italian – people. Today the underground setting of this local tradition has undergone a predictable process of heritagisation, turning what was conceived as a threshold between the living and the dead into a museum of popular religiosity, a place of worship into a cultural heritage (Niola 2022: 94).

THE *ROSARY OF 100 REQUIEM*

The second case I will examine here comes from my hometown, Castellaneta (Puglia, in the province of Taranto): a traditional Catholic practice expressly devoted to the Purgatory souls that has been revived and given an innovative ritual form.[5] It is known as the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*. Like the canonical Rosary, it consists of the reiterated recitation – 100 times altogether – of a prayer, *Requiem aeternam*, specifically concerning the faithful departed. It was something not unknown in my town, since it had been carried out as a collective act until the 1960s, under the name of *coronella* ("little crown"), every first or second Friday of the month in the oratory of the local cathedral. This was told

to me, during a long semi-structured interview in September 2018, by Egidio, a 75-year-old man – formerly a journalist and theatrical director, recently come back to his hometown – who personally had attended that monthly practice. Its disappearance coincided with that of the organizing of the lay confraternity, the Brothers of the Holy Crucifix, whose establishment dated back to 1648. The *Rosary of 100 Requiem* was exactly recovered following the re-establishment, in November 2016, of such a confraternity. The idea came from Egidio himself (who died in November 2020), who was also the eldest member of the confraternity and the only one among them to be acquainted with the existence of that kind of prayer for the dead. The *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, as an intercession prayer, hence a merciful act for the Purgatory souls, was warmly embraced by all the other Brothers, who were looking for something to put in practice their own mission – an imitation of Jesus crucified by doing works of mercy. It was nonetheless given a new form and setting, under the creative and passionate guidance of Egidio, who wanted to make an old religious custom a more significant and engaging experience for its participants.

After being officially approved by the local bishop, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* took place for the first time in March 2017 as a ritual procession in the cemetery; it was performed by almost all the Brothers together with some common faithful summoned by them directly or by the posters appended in the churches and along the town's streets. In order to carry out my field research, I have attended such a religious event, as an observing participant, almost every month from December 2017 to August 2022, when I moved from Castellaneta to Vieste, more than 200 kilometres away. I have nonetheless continued to be informed and updated about it both by the reports of my main informant Roberto, and through the Whatsapp chat of the confraternity, in which I had been included since its opening. Roberto being the prior of the confraternity, and the most engaged Brother in organizing and disseminating the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, I conducted two extensive interviews with him, the first one in September 2018, along with Egidio and Antonella (a 43-year-old woman, at the time the last person to have joined the confraternity), the second one almost three years later, in July 2021. Shorter interviews and informal talks have been conducted, just before and after the performing of the ritual, with some common participants. Furthermore, I took a number of photographs to capture the setting, the actors and the different moments of the procession, and I filmed the entire performance during my first participation, in December 2017.

The *Rosary of 100 Requiem* was structured as a *Via Crucis*, namely as a walking itinerary consisting of ten stations – instead of the fourteen making up the *Via Crucis* carried out during the Holy Week – each of them commemorating, by an appropriate reading, an episode of the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ.[6] Between one station and the next one, then during the walking phase of the ritual, the participants recited ten *Requiem aeternam*, so as to reach a total of a hundred at the end of the route. The procession covered the cemetery in most

of its extension, starting and finishing in front of a little church located within the cemetery near its main entrance. The Brothers of the Holy Crucifix, wearing their traditional clothing (a white surplice and a red *mozzetta* – a sort of cloak), walked ahead of the procession, one of them carrying a huge cross (see Figure 3). At the beginning and at the end of the ritual the canonical Catholic prayers – *Pater*, *Ave* and *Gloria* – were recited, along with some specific supplications devoted to the Purgatory souls.

Figure 3. The Brothers of the Holy Crucifix in procession, the first of them carrying a huge cross.

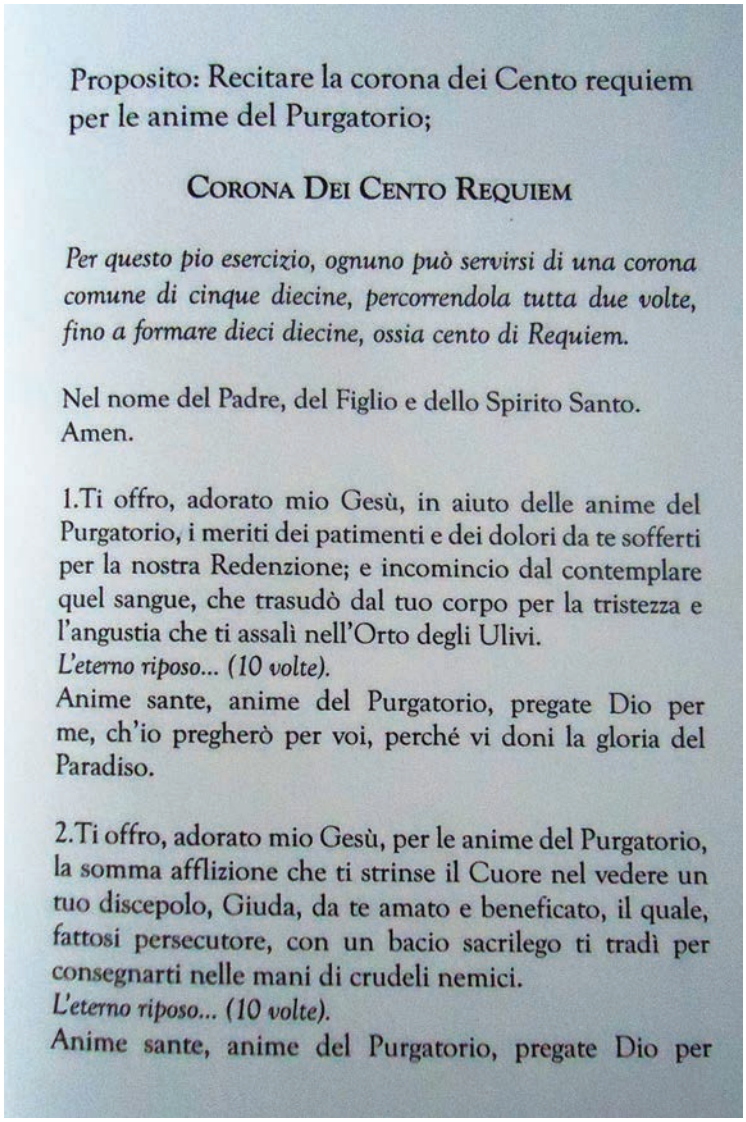
Photograph: Elettra Carrassi.

Little leaflets of four pages, containing the texts to be read along the itinerary, were preliminarily delivered every time by the Brothers to the participants (see Figure 4). What is written in these leaflets is essential to understanding the meaning of the ritual, because for each station there is a short description of a moment of *Passio Christi* framed within pious formulae begging for mercy both for the Purgatory souls and those who are now praying for them. What arises from this religious practice is therefore an exchange of (wished) agencies between the dead souls suffering in Purgatory and some living people

purposefully gathered in a cemetery to take care of them. Significantly, such an exchange is mediated by the redemptive agency granted by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ – and his Mother, whose sorrow for the Son's death is seen as closely related to that of Jesus. In fact, the participants in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* offer to the Lord God, on behalf of the Purgatory souls, the redeeming pains suffered by Jesus Christ on the Earth. As a consequence, they ask the dead holy souls to intercede with God on behalf of themselves. The pious formula concluding each station is explicit in that sense: "Holy souls, souls of Purgatory, pray God for me, because I shall pray for you, so that He gives you the glory of Heaven." On the other hand, this was the specific aim pursued by the confraternity, also by virtue of its intermediary position between the laypeople and the sacred things. As a privileged channel connecting Earth and Heaven, the Brothers can act, through their special link with Jesus as our saviour, as mediators between the needs of the common faithful and those of the Purgatory souls. And this function can be conveniently fulfilled by means of a ritual and collective prayer such as the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, all the more so if turned into an open, public and processional practice carried out in a cemetery every first Sunday of the month. As emphasized by Roberto during our second interview, praying "collectively, as a community" is something better than praying individually, "especially in such a critical juncture for the Catholicism" (personal communication 2021). The confraternity has thus given a more solemn and engaging form both to a religious practice formerly performed in closed spaces, and to the informal tradition of walking through the cemetery for visiting and praying for our own dearly departed. Actually, as claimed by one of the most regular participants, Andrea, a 67-year-old butcher, "reciting a Rosary for the dead is more appropriate and effective than celebrating a requiem mass"; his wife Maria Luigia (61), on the other hand, justified her participation as a way "to feel closer my own dead, in particular my mother, recently died" (personal communication 2021).

Even more importantly, while the worship of the dead is traditionally circumscribed within a limited period of the year – the first two days of November, framed between the *Novena* (i.e. nine days: 24 October-1 November) and the *Ottavario* (i.e. eight days: 2-9 November) – the monthly recurrence of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* allows the faithful to extend their care of the dead to the whole year. Accordingly, at least for the participants in this ritual prayer, whose number has remained significantly stable since 2017 until today, religious values such as *pietas* and *caritas* for the dead, which are perceived as something distant and outdated even by most believers – as frankly maintained by Roberto, Egidio and Antonella during my interview – are revived and updated. Actually, all the common faithful I have talked with during my fieldwork have constantly claimed and demonstrated a genuine care and respect for the mystery of death, as well as a firm belief in the existence of the Purgatory and in the effectiveness of their prayers for the dead holy souls. For instance, Isa, a 59-year-old

woman, explained her assiduous participation in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* as a means "to let ascend our dearly departed to Heaven" (personal communication 2021). Something similar can be said about the Neapolitan adopters of the *anime pezzentelle*, who made the presence of the dead in their lives an ordinary, and not an extra-ordinary, thing, thanks to their recurring visits to the adopted skulls and the continuous dialogue with them. In other words, a space expressly devoted to the dead and death, such as a cemetery – outdoor or underground – is made by its most frequent visitors into a perfect setting to turn what is today generally lived as an *exception*, i.e. the concern for the dead, into a *routine*.



Proposito: Recitare la corona dei Cento requiem per le anime del Purgatorio;

CORONA DEI CENTO REQUIEM

Per questo pio esercizio, ognuno può servirsi di una corona comune di cinque diecine, percorrendola tutta due volte, fino a formare dieci diecine, ossia cento di Requiem.

Nel nome del Padre, del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo.
Amen.

1.Ti offro, adorato mio Gesù, in aiuto delle anime del Purgatorio, i meriti dei patimenti e dei dolori da te sofferti per la nostra Redenzione; e incomincio dal contemplare quel sangue, che trasudò dal tuo corpo per la tristezza e l'angustia che ti assalì nell'Orto degli Ulivi.
L'eterno riposo... (10 volte).
Anime sante, anime del Purgatorio, pregate Dio per me, ch'io pregherò per voi, perché vi doni la gloria del Paradiso.

2.Ti offro, adorato mio Gesù, per le anime del Purgatorio, la somma afflizione che ti strinse il Cuore nel vedere un tuo discepolo, Giuda, da te amato e beneficato, il quale, fattosi persecutore, con un bacio sacrilego ti tradì per consegnarti nelle mani di crudeli nemici.
L'eterno riposo... (10 volte).
Anime sante, anime del Purgatorio, pregate Dio per

Figure 4. The leaflet delivered to the participants to the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*.
Photograph: Vito Carrassi.

CONCLUSION

To come to a comprehensive understanding of the subject so far examined, namely the mutual agency of the dead and the living through the religious medium of Purgatory, let me give a comparison of the two cases considered. What is common in both practices is the idea of Purgatory as a liminal and intermediate place between Earth and Heaven, therefore a place connecting life and death in the context of an afterlife; a temporary condition, which makes the transition itself from life to death something slower and more manageable. Consequently, the inhabitants of such a place, the Purgatory souls, are seen as possible mediators between the living and God, thus providing a privileged channel of communication between "down here" and "up there". This means that, through suitable prayers and practices, one can achieve divine mercy and/or supernatural help. The setting of such an exchange between the living and the dead, as we have seen, can be both an informal cemetery, such as the underground, hidden, almost clandestine space indiscriminately gathering anonymous dead in the form of skulls in Naples, and a veritable cemetery, that is an open, ordered, public space gathering nameable dead enshrined in individual tombs, as is the case of Castellaneta. While the cult of the *anime pezzentelle* was carried out directly by individuals, perhaps supported by their relatives and continued by their descendants, in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* the actors are a more or less established group of faithful led by a lay confraternity (a minimum of 12 to a maximum of 33 people have attended the monthly events so far). As a consequence, in the former case we have a spontaneous and informal individual worship devoted to a single dead person, less and less tolerated by the Church; in the latter case there is an ecclesiastically approved form of popular piety devoted to all the Purgatory souls, rearranged and revitalised by a lay confraternity.

Nonetheless, in both cases what is staged is a (wished-for) exchange of agencies between the living and the "anonymous and immense crowd of suffering spirits" (Niola 2022: 23–24) inhabiting, according to the Catholic doctrine, Purgatory, interpreted at the same time as a sort of temporary Hell, and as "a purifying collective place, known and close, where one can atone for their sins and achieve the release from them thanks to the suffrages and the pity of the living" (Pardo 1983: 117). To spend time and take care of unknown dead belonging to a more or less distant past, such as the skulls interpreted as *anime pezzentelle* in Naples, as well as to join a confraternity devoted to the Purgatory souls and/or to get involved in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* may be seen as an understandable choice for individuals sincerely and intensely attached to the sacredness of the death, the faith in the afterlife and the values of mercy, empathy and mutual assistance. As stated, with a little emotion, by my informant Maria Luigia: "Yes, I believe in the afterlife […]. I believe that there is another life, because otherwise, I don't know, I would become disheartened.

My mother, for instance, has suffered, so, after this suffering, I think she is now enjoying in Heaven. I pray so that she is well" (personal communication 2021). According to Roberto, on the other hand, in confirmation of what he had told me three years earlier (see above), "worship of the dead must be always fostered, also because our prayers release many souls from Purgatory; once in Heaven, they can pray and intercede for us" (personal communication 2021). In other words, those who pursue such a regular and confident interaction with the Purgatory souls are people in search of something providing their life with a higher and deeper sense as well as a hope for a better future, both on Earth and in the afterlife.

NOTES

1 Regarding the vexed question of the material and/or spiritual nature of the Purgatory see Pasulka (2015: 4–5): "From the twelfth century to the present, representations in various sources, including medieval chronicles, *exempla*, early modern periodicals, and, later, in pamphlets, books, and magazines, and today on websites and in books, have depicted purgatory variously as a location on earth, a place simultaneously spiritual and physical, and, most recently, as a more abstract condition of souls experiencing the pain of loss."

2 In an ethnographic study on how death is experienced in a district of Naples, Italo Pardo (1983: 117) argues that "both hell and heaven are permanent, radical conditions. Negations – in a sense or in another – of the actual precariousness of existence which makes so peculiar and dramatic to live in these areas. In the traditional idea of the afterlife [...] one can therefore recognize the projection of the existential condition of these people, but above all their deep need of an immediate relationship with the sacred [...] which give a hope for an intercession in the earthly life."

3 According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1999: 561): "Intercession is a prayer of petition which leads us to pray as Jesus did. He is the one intercessor with the Father on behalf of men, especially sinners."

4 As pointed out by Marino Niola (2022: 51–52; see also 17): "The dead soul reveals itself in a dream to the faithful by making itself recognized and indicating its own place. In the cemetery of Fontanelle [...] the faithful dreamt of the skull and the spot of the cemetery where it was. In San Pietro ad Aram, instead, only after the beginning of the worship does the dead soul appear in a dream and speak to the faithful who, thanks to that indication, can give it a name."

5 I have presented my research on this subject in two conferences: at the "City Rituals: 13th International Conference of SIEF's Ritual Year Working Group" (Bucharest, 7–9 November 2018), with the title "The Resurrecturis: Reviving an old ritual (and a traditional belief) in the public space of a cemetery", and at the 16th SIEF Congress "Living Uncertainty" (Brno, 7–10 June 2023), with the title "Praying for the Dead during the Last Five Years". See Carrassi 2024.

6 I use the past tense because, after the break imposed by the pandemic between 2020 and early 2021, during which the ritual has been performed in a virtual form via Whatsapp, since May 2021 the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* has lost its processional form, turning into a collective but static prayer recited, depending on the weather, inside or outside the cemetery church.

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